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A Condominium for the Kurils

By Mark Feygin

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The horrific tsunami and nuclear disaster that hit Japan may help resolve the 50-year island dispute. For decades, both sides have remained entrenched in their positions. Russia has basically said, "The Kuril Islands are ours, and we don't care what the Japanese think." For its part, Japan stubbornly demands that the islands — which it calls the Northern Territories — be returned immediately and unconditionally. Should Russia respond to Japan's current troubles by easing its traditionally adversarial stance on this issue, or should it take the opposite tack by using Japan's weakened condition to try to force a solution?

Japan has demonstrated a willingness to deal with the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident, but it remains unclear whether Russia would be able to cope with similar problems within the disputed territory.

The nuclear accident demonstrated that the four disputed islands are more closely related to Japan's Hokkaido island in geographic, socio-economic and environmental terms than they are to Russia.

Already burdened with a poor economy and few prospects for the future, the 16,000 Russians

living on those islands — who typically receive scant attention from Moscow anyway — will probably want to leave more than ever in the face of the mounting environmental disaster. And Japan will likely refuse to provide financial compensation and all other forms of assistance in dealing with the radioactive contamination of the disputed territory until its final status is determined.

There is an alternative to the question of whether Russia should give away the four islands: a joint-ownership arrangement, or "condominium." History has several very successful examples of condominium: Britain and France jointly held the New Hebrides from 1906 to 1980, and Tangier enjoyed unprecedented prosperity when European states maintained the city as a demilitarized zone from 1912 to 1956. And closer to home, Russian and Japanese forces both occupied Sakhalin until 1945, when it came under the full control of the Soviet Union.

Declaring the four islands a tax-free and custom-free zone and creating a joint Russian-Japanese high-technology center — potentially far more promising than the Skolkovo project — could provide a strong impetus to the entire economy of the Far East. It would also help address the energy shortage. Japan seems to be accelerating its research into alternative energy, and Russia stands in no less need of such technological advances.

Such a condominium would use both the ruble and yen as currencies. Japanese immigrants, especially those who suffered as a result of the tsunami, should be allowed to settle permanently on the islands within the limits of a predetermined quota. And the rights of the current inhabitants would be protected by a joint Russian-Japanese administration.

Of course, the Kuril condominium would have to become a demilitarized zone. This means that Russia would have to sacrifice its military infrastructure there, including tracking stations on two of the disputed islands, Kunashir and Iturup. But is that so great a price to pay for solving one of the most intractable problems of the second half of the 20th century?

Both sides should start talks now about creating a condominium in advance of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum to be held in Russia in September 2012.

Given the dire economic and social consequences Japan is facing in the wake of its multiple disasters, there is a high probability that Tokyo will agree to the condominium solution. And this approach would be more constructive than ignoring the actual problem, as Moscow's foreign policy leadership has often done in the past.

There is a silver lining to every disaster, and President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have a unique chance to offer a constructive and mutually beneficial proposal to finally resolve the island standoff. But a status quo policy has been the dominant factor in Putin's decade-long reign, and if this remains in force, Moscow will probably continue ignoring the islands and hope that Japan's claims simply go away. They won't. Medvedev and Putin need to take a proactive, fair and creative approach to the island stalemate, and the condominium idea is an excellent place to start.

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